



U.S. Department
of Transportation

**Federal Highway
Administration**

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Memorandum

Subject: **Esthetics and Visual Quality
Guidance Information**

Date: **AUG 18 1986**

From: **Director, Office of Environmental Policy
Washington, D.C. 20590**

Reply to
Attn of: **HEV-20**

To: **Regional Federal Highway Administrators
Regions 1-10
Direct Federal Program Administrator**

The attached information is intended for use as a guide in the development and discussion of visual quality information in the project development process. It contains information and guidance which can be of use in the preparation of visual impact analyses and in the decision-making process on matters associated with the visual effects of proposed highway projects. It also contains a compilation of FHWA law, policy, procedures, and regulations which have visual quality implications. This information will be included in the annual update of the Environmental Guidebook.

Ali F. Sevin

Attachment

**Federal Highway Administration
HEV-20:EJohnson:dch:5/14/86:retyped 8/15/86:x69173
cc:
HEV-10
HEV-11
HEV-12(2)
HEV-30
HEV-20/Files(2)**

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**GUIDANCE MATERIAL ON
THE PREPARATION OF
VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENTS**

**OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY
ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS DIVISION**

GUIDANCE MATERIAL FOR PREPARATION OF VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

BACKGROUND

The appearance of new and improved highway facilities will have an impact on the scenic and visual quality of an area. Consequently, the planning, design, construction, and operation of the Federal-aid highway program should incorporate consideration for esthetics. More specifically, the environmental process should determine the potential for visual quality impact. Where a potential for visual quality impact exists, an analysis of proposed highway improvements should be performed to determine their effect on the visual quality of the areas they traverse.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires that consideration be given to determine the effects proposed Federal actions or projects are likely to have on the quality of the human environment. The NEPA and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations identify esthetics as one of the elements or factors in the human environment which must be considered in determining the effects of a project. Additionally, Title 23 U.S.C. 109(h), in calling for the promulgation of guidelines to assure consideration of the environmental effects of proposed projects, cites the esthetic effect of proposed projects as a matter which must be fully considered. This concern is repeated in FHWA Technical Advisory T6640.8 which provides guidance on the preparation of environmental documents.

This guidance document is intended to assist in determining the content and format of visual impact discussions in environmental documents or studies deemed necessary in the development of highway projects.

**VISUAL QUALITY
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

1. Q. What are visual resources?

A. Visual resources are those physical features that make up the visible landscape, including land, water, vegetative and man-made elements. These elements are the stimuli upon which actual visual experience is based. Visual resources are not, however, limited to elements or features that are of outstanding visual quality. A location or element in the visual environment can have visual values attributed to it by its viewers regardless of its quality. Viewer sensitivity or local values can confer visual significance on landscape features and areas that would otherwise appear unexceptional.

2. Q. Is there a regulatory requirement for a visual impact analysis in environmental documents?

A. There are no FHWA regulations that specifically require the inclusion of a visual impact analysis in environmental documents. However, NEPA and the CEQ regulations identify esthetics as one of the elements or factors in the human environment which must be considered in determining the effects of a project. Further, Title 23, U.S.C. 109(h) cites esthetic effects as a matter that must be fully considered in developing a project. Esthetics, as used in these provisions, relate to the visual effects of a project.

Where there is a potential for visual impacts, the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should contain a summary of the visual assessment prepared for the project alternative. The inclusion of a discussion on the visual effects of a proposed project in an Environmental Assessment depends on the visual characteristics of the area through which the project is proposed. If the visual environment encompasses significant visual elements or it is unique due to the sensitivity of its affected viewers, a visual analysis would be warranted. The discussion, however, should be commensurate in scope with the anticipated impact.

3. Q. Is it conceivable that a project can be constructed without having a visual impact on its surrounding area?

A. The construction of highway projects, whether in scenic or in unexceptional visual areas, generally heightens viewers awareness of visual changes in the environment. It is very unlikely for a highway project to be constructed without having any visual effect on an area. However, the resulting visual impact can be either beneficial or adverse with varying degrees of significance. Attention should be given to those visually sensitive areas most likely to be impacted by the project.

4. **Q. Should there be any concern for visual impacts when the highway project is confined to existing right-of-way?**

A. The fact that work associated with a highway construction or improvement project is accomplished within existing right-of-way should not negate the need for considering the visual effects of a proposed project.

5. **Q. Should there be a visual impact discussion in an environmental document if the project enhances the visual quality of an area?**

A. The visual impact discussion should be included when the undertaking has a beneficial effect on the surrounding area. The visual analysis is not intended to focus exclusively on the negative impacts of a proposed project. Beneficial impacts arising from the action are as important to the decision-making process as are negative impacts. Since emphasis is focused on planning or locating projects where they will be least destructive to the environment, information concerning visual impacts, positive or negative, can aid the project corridor and/or alternative selection process. Enhancement of the visual quality of an area as a result of a project could contribute to general acceptance of the project by the public.

6. **Q. Can a project have a visual impact on an area that has already been visually affected by a highway and/or ongoing development?**

A. Visual impacts arise as a result of any alteration to the existing visual environment. For example, the widening of an existing highway can result in significant visual impacts from the removal of vegetation, addition of signing, or simply from the overall increase in scale of the new facility.

7. **Q. Can an objective visual analysis be made when visual values are perceived as subjective in nature?**

A. The relative importance and value of a visual setting is generally reflected through the response of its viewer. This does not negate the ability to evaluate the potential change in the quality of the visual environment through an objective approach or analysis. The character of the landscape which generally gives visual value to a setting can be identified and described. This awareness has led to the development of criteria which can be applied in an evaluative or assessment process to produce an objective assessment of a visual setting. Through the appropriate use of an evaluation methodology, the relative scenic or visual qualities of landscape settings and the effects of a proposed project can be assessed. The FHWA has developed a methodology that can be used to assess the visual impact of highway projects. The publication, "Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects" contains necessary information and guidance that can be followed to produce an objective visual impact analysis.

8. **Q. How much detail should go into an EIS visual impact discussion?**

A. The discussion should contain sufficient information to briefly describe the significant visual resources (topography, water bodies, man-made development, vegetation, etc). It should also identify sensitive viewers and/or viewer groups which would be impacted most by the project. The visual impacts of the project on these resources and viewers should be identified along with appropriate measures to mitigate or minimize them. The volume and type of material necessary to summarize these concerns will, however, vary from project to project.

9. **Q. Are there any areas or activities which are more likely to be visually impacted by a highway project?**

A. The effects a project has on an area generally depend on the activities, exposure and sensitivity of its viewers. There are areas that have been generally recognized as critical or sensitive locations. They include:

- residential areas;
- areas of recognized scenic beauty (local, State, national);
- parks and recreation areas;
- historic or other culturally important resources;
- entry to urban areas;
- water bodies; and
- public facilities (e.g., hospitals, colleges, universities, etc).

The nature and relative sensitivity of these areas may require that a more detailed visual assessment be made to assure adequate consideration has been given to the visual effects of the project.

10. **Q. What measures can be taken to mitigate the visual effects of a project.**

A. Visual impacts can be mitigated through a variety of actions ranging from location and alignment through design, construction, and maintenance. Some of the more common measures include landscaping, screening, the incorporation of architectural features in the design of structures, selective clearing and thinning, earthwork, and litter control. Highway corridors themselves can be located so as to avoid or minimize visible impact upon visual resources that are controversial or exceptional in quality. Mitigation measures must always address the specific visual impact caused by the proposed project and the reaction to that impact by a specific viewer group.

11. **Q. Is there a need to cite mitigation measures in an environmental document when the visual effects of a proposed project are not by themselves a significant adverse impact?**

A. Yes. Any action the highway agency plans to take to mitigate such impacts or to enhance the visual quality of the project or its surrounding environment will be useful and supportive to the environmental process and promote public acceptance of the project.

12. Q. Considering the timing of the project development process, is it premature to propose mitigation measures in the environmental document which involve design features?

A. When adverse visual impacts of a proposed project can best be mitigated by design considerations, it should not be overlooked as a viable action. The environmental process serves as an aid to decision makers in planning highway projects. Environmental concerns can serve as a determining factor in the location and the design of a project. It is important that these necessary guiding factors be identified early so they can be incorporated in subsequent project phases even though all of the design details cannot be finalized.

13. Q. Can visual quality be addressed in the "Affected Environment" section of an EIS?

A. Yes. This is the place to summarize the existing environment in terms of the visual resources (land form, land cover, and man-made development) that are present and visible from the project area. It is also the best place to describe the viewers and viewer groups that will actually be affected by the project.

14. Q. Is there any simple method of screening proposed projects to determine the potential impacts for significant adverse visual impacts?

A. Yes. Completing the visual scoping questionnaire (Appendix F) will usually identify those projects where significant visual impacts will arise.

15. Q. Should photographs and/or graphic illustrations be made part of the visual impact analysis and be included in the environmental document?

A. Yes. The visual characteristics of an area and the visual effects of highways can best be conveyed visually. Photographs should be used to illustrate the visual character of key features in the existing landscapes. They are very helpful and can be essential for the reader's understanding of the visual setting. The visual impact of a project can be assessed and illustrated through visual depiction of the project's appearance relative to the existing landscape as seen from significant viewpoints. Various graphic techniques can be used in this process.